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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001027

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL WI MO AG

SUBJECT: BOUTEFLIKA MESSAGE TO POLISARIO MENTIONS SUPPORT
FOR SAHRAWI INDEPENDENCE

REF: ALGIERS 1016

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (U) In a written message to Polisario Secretary General Abdelaziz on the occasion of the 32nd anniversary of the formation of the Polisario Front and published in the Algerian press May 22, President Bouteflika has raised eyebrows and Moroccan ire by mentioning independence for the Sahrawi people. In the letter, Bouteflika noted the importance of the upcoming Arab Maghreb Union summit to be held in Tripoli May 25-26, terming it as important as the summit that established the AMU in 1987, but also stressed that he would go to the summit "faithful to our principles," including support for the Sahrawi cause. Going beyond his usual description of the Western Sahara as an issue of decolonization to be resolved in a UN framework, Bouteflika wrote, "Algeria supports this cause and all the others, in keeping with the UN Charter, with a view to helping the Sahrawi people, just like all people, to regain their freedom and their independence."

¶2. (U) The Algerian press May 23 reported Rabat's reaction to Bouteflika's message. According to the Algerian French-language daily El Watan, the Moroccan MFA issued a statement declaring that Morocco "strongly deplores the official declarations and positions that Algeria believed necessary to express during the past few days regarding the Moroccan Sahara." The Moroccan MFA statement reportedly went on to note that the two countries "had decided, in March on the occasion of the historic visit of His Majesty King Mohammed VI to Algiers, to engage resolutely and sincerely on the path of peace-making and normalization, while allowing our national question (i.e. the Western Sahara) to find a definitive solution within the framework of the United Nations."

¶3. (C) Ambassador contacted Moroccan Ambassador Benrayane, who said he was "astonished" and disappointed by Bouteflika's message. Benrayane asserted that while Bouteflika normally sends a message to Abdelaziz on the occasion of the anniversary of the founding of the Polisario, this was the first time Bouteflika had mentioned Sahrawi independence. Benrayane was at a loss to explain Bouteflika's motivation, especially since the publication of his message came only a few days before the Tripoli summit.

¶4. (C) Comment: We are also puzzled by Bouteflika's reference to Algerian support for Sahrawi independence, especially in the context not only of the AMU summit but also the decision reported reftel for Prime Minister Ouyahia to visit Rabat in June to relaunch the bilateral committees. Ambassador plans to discuss Bouteflika's message with Presidential Chief of Staff Belkheir, and note our expectation that Algeria remains committed to normalizing relations with Morocco.

¶5. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.
ERDMAN